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SUBJECT: URF SEEKS GREATER INPUT IN PEACE PROCESS; EXPLORES
STRATEGIC ALLIANCE WITH SLA-UNITY

REF A) KHARTOUM 1130
B) KHARTOUM 1366
C) KHARTOUM 1614

11. (SBU) Summary: During an October 29 meeting, United Resistance Front (URF) political commissar Tadjadine Niam told poloff that the Darfur peace process will never gain traction if the international community keeps ignoring the rebel movements. Niam decried the lack of consultation with rebels over the selection of Djibril Bassole as Joint Chief Mediator, questioned Bassole's suitability for that role, and complained he has done little to reach out to the movements during his four month tenure. (Note: Niam subsequently met Bassole for the first time in Tripoli on November 1 and told poloff that while the meeting was constructive, he was discouraged that Bassole has yet to decide on a course of action. End Note). In the field, URF Chairman Bahar Abu Gharda told poloff on November 5 that URF is engaged in continuing talks with SLA-Unity for a broad-based strategic alliance on negotiating positions, military operations and media outreach. Abu Gharda also reported frequent contact and good relations with SLM-MM. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On October 29, poloff met with Tadjadine Bechir Niam, political commissar of the URF and former JEM negotiator in Abuja. Accompanying Niam were London representatives of URF El Tahir Yahia, Bakhit Adam, and Mohammadain Hashim. (Note: URF was formed in April 2008 as a coalition of five movements: the Justice and Equality Movement/Collective Leadership JEM/CL; SLA/Field Command of Adam Bakhit; SLA/Khamis Abdalla; the Arab-dominated United Revolutionary Forces Front URFF; and the National Movement for Reform and Development NMRD. URFF, Khamis Abdalla and several other groups and individuals have since reportedly abandoned the coalition, but URF leadership, which is drawn largely from JEM/CL. insists the coalition remains intact. End Note.)

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY "IGNORES THE MOVEMENTS"

13. (SBU) Niam complained to poloff that the international community "has exceeded its role" in the Darfur peace process by ignoring the rebel movements in a number of key decisions. "We can't recall any point when we were consulted about UNAMID deployment," he said. "We have serious reservations about Arab troops, because these governments have supported the GOS throughout the conflict." Nor had the rebel movements been consulted on the choice of Joint Chief Mediator Bassole, he said, adding that the continual change of mediators has contributed to the prolonging of the conflict.

14. (SBU) Niam said that up to that point neither he nor anyone in URF had met Bassole, so there was little to say about him. But over the course of the meeting with poloff, Niam became increasingly critical of the selection of Bassole and the man himself. Bassole's

francophone background was "not compatible with Sudan," and his history as a military man means "he's used to receiving orders from his supervisors," he said. He also complained that Bassole "is not consulting the movements, only the government," adding that he has yet to reach out to URF in the four months since he was appointed. "We don't hear his voice, or see any of his efforts," said Niam.

15. (SBU) On November 7 Poloff spoke to Niam subsequent to his meeting with Bassole for the first time in Tripoli on November 1. Niam welcomed the chance for URF to brief Bassole on its positions, and emphasized that peace can only be achieved by engaging with the parties to the conflict. "We told him we were not pleased with his late start and failure to consult with all the parties," he said. Bassole was receptive, he continued, but remained in listening mode. "He didn't rule out anything," said Niam. "He told us he's still listening to all the players, and after that, he'll decide how to proceed." He also noted that Bassole appeared discouraged by a lack of willingness to negotiate on the part of the other rebel movements.

URF: STAYING INTACT?

16. (SBU) Niam reported that staying intact is a continual struggle for URF, but it has managed to persevere despite several individual and group defections (Ref A). He blamed the international community for creating strong disincentives for rebel movements to unify, complaining that "URF is five movements in one, but you give us the same number of seats at the table as [Khalil Ibrahim's] JEM." Consequently, "the message you are sending is that you are more powerful if you split off," he said. He added that URF "has done its best" with regard to unification, but needs to be rewarded for its

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efforts.

17. (SBU) Despite acknowledging its internal struggles, Niam claimed that URF was the strongest movement both politically and militarily, "because it is five movements in one." He stated that URF has cooperated on the ground with the SLA-Unity and is in contact with SLM-Minni Minnawi, but "strongly believes [Minnawi] has betrayed the cause" of the movements by signing the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) with the government. Niam, who served as JEM negotiator at the DPA talks in Abuja, stated also that "we told him that we understood [the GOS] better than he did," but "now he has a better understanding of how they operate," referring to Minni's constant struggle for implementation of the DPA. Niam acknowledged the strength of Khalil Ibrahim's JEM movement, but told poloff that "he's not as strong as you think," noting how JEM has lost significant manpower and equipment since its May 2008 attack on Omdurman. He was dismissive of Abdul Wahid, calling him "puzzling and unpredictable."

THOUGHTS ON FUTURE NEGOTIATIONS

18. (SBU) Niam stated that URF was not rejecting the Qatar Initiative, but has not yet committed because of reservations about the Arab League. URF is nonetheless developing comprehensive positions for negotiations on all issues in consultation with its members who are spread out across "13 to 17 branches" across the world, including Germany, the UK and the US. (Note: It is noteworthy that in bragging about the supposed number of URF branch offices worldwide, Niam did not have a precise number in mind, which seemed to cast doubt on his claim. End note.) He stated that URF's final positions would remain secret until they are presented at the negotiating table, but they include the familiar demands for one region, a vice presidential slot for Darfur, and fair and equal representation for Darfuris in the civil service and executive body, particularly in prominent ministries. "We don't want to end up in the Ministry of [Culture, Youth and Sport] or [Water and Irrigation Resources]," he said. He also cited the reform of the state security apparatus as a key agenda item, calling for a clear mission statement and reduced role for the SAF and the dissolution of the Central Reserve Police. While he reaffirmed URF's commitment to a united, democratic Sudan, he warned that moderate voices were losing

ground in Darfur. "A new voice is emerging calling for self-determination," and this demand will be increasingly difficult to quell, he said.

¶9. (SBU) Niam stated that it is the intention of the GOS that really matters for bringing peace to Darfur, rather than any particular initiative. Without the will of both parties, he said, peace talks are "like a doctor treating a patient. He might relieve the symptoms, but he can't kill the disease." He stated that while Ali Osman Taha has shown a willingness to solve the Darfur crisis, there were doubts about his authority to deliver and implement a deal. Conversely, while Presidential advisor Nafie Ali Nafie will "fight until the last drop of blood" against any solution reached by Taha, such an agreement would be strongly supported by the GOS, he said. But the most preferable interlocutor for the NCP, according to Niam, is Salah Ghosh. Recalling his days as a JEM negotiator, Niam said that "with Ghosh you can reach an agreement within an hour. He will tell you up front what he can and can't give you, and whatever the outcome you'll know he'll enforce it."

¶10. (SBU) With regard to civil society involvement in the peace process, Niam was largely indifferent to ongoing the Sudan People's Initiative, but cautioned the international community against putting civil society on the proverbial pedestal. "The NCP has and will continue to co-opt civil society movements within Sudan," he said. "It is better for the movements to deal directly with the government." To this end, he was quite adamant that civil society groups ought not to participate in peace talks, arguing that the NCP will ensure that only pro-government civil society groups are present at negotiations and this will result in the government having "two voices at the table." He further pointed out that neither of the successful talks in Navaisha (CPA) nor Asmara (ESPA) featured representatives from civil society. "There is no precedent for this," said Niam.

UPDATE FROM THE FIELD

¶11. (SBU) On November 5 poloff spoke via satellite phone with URF Chairman Bahar Abu Gharda, who was in the field. Abu Gharda noted that URF has continued to coordinate closely with SLA-Unity on

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military matters since their forces fought side by side to repel the SAF military offensive in North Darfur in September (Ref B). He stated URF and SLA-Unity are also engaged in advanced discussions for a broad-based strategic alliance. "We will later declare joint positions on negotiations, media and military matters," he said. Abu Gharda noted that URF has also been in frequent contact with SLM-Minni Minnawi, and maintains good relations on the ground with the latter. "We have an understanding that when peace talks are complete, we will work closely together for the future of Darfur," he said.

¶12. (SBU) Abu Gharda confirmed that there is a large buildup of GOS forces in North Darfur (Ref C), stating that within the past several days there has been a major mobilization of Janjaweed near Diza. (Note: Many Janjaweed have now been integrated into the Border Intelligence Forces of the SAF or the Central Reserve Police of the Ministry of Interior, the latter of which is escorting both UNAMID and WFP convoys. End Note). He also reported that on November 4 URF forces in South Darfur conveyed to him that GOS helicopters painted white to resemble UN aircraft (but with no UN markings) flew over their positions in what he described as a reconnaissance mission. (Note: The SAF have been accused in the past of disguising military aircraft as humanitarian ones, and according to the tri-partite agreement signed by GOS, UN, and AU, the GOS agreed to stop this practice. End Note.)

¶13. (SBU) Comment: Niam's repeated claim that URF is the most powerful rebel movement due to the fact it represents "five movements in one" simply doesn't hold water, as URF is a collection of second-tier rebel factions whose military strength and scope was in question even before the recent rash of defections. But it nonetheless represents one of the larger non-signatories, at least nominally, and if Bassole convinces them to commit to talks in Doha,

this could be an important first step in building momentum and legitimacy for the Qatari Initiative. This should not be too difficult a task, given URF's desire to stay relevant and its apparent preparations for eventual negotiations. As to URF's potential alliance with SLA/Unity, such a partnership could simplify the peace process and should be encouraged. But it could just as easily be negated by ongoing internal strife within SLA/Unity.

110. (U) Embassy London cleared this cable prior to transmission.

FERNANDEZ